ORGANIZING A LONG TERM RECOVERY COMMITTEE

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Introduction

During the emergency and relief phase following a disaster, organizational presence, volunteers and resources may be abundant. Soon, however, volunteers and resources become scarce but much still needs to be done. It is important for community and county groups to identify pools of agencies willing to help and to coordinate resources as soon as possible.

Claiming Responsibility

- Invite people together who are ready to claim responsibility for long-term recovery in their area. Invite all religious communities, community based organizations and VOAD members in the area to participate.
- Form a recovery group separate from, but linked to, inter-religious organizations. A separate group will help keep the energy of the group focused on the recovery. Interfaith organizations will also be focused on recovery but will have a broader scope in trying to address spiritual needs as well.
- Community based groups may already have a full agenda. Unless a separate collaborative and inclusive group is formed, the recovery may get stalled in political and turf battles.

Announce Your Group's Presence or Survey

- If you can define the area of damage, survey it door to door. There are voluntary agencies that have members trained to do this.
- The survey will help you find people who have, for various reasons, not requested assistance.
- If you can't define where the damage is, announce the existence of your group to the media. Human interest stories and reports of voluntary agency assistance are usually of interest.
- During the survey, or when people come to you for help, make sure they get signed up with FEMA and have seen ARC for immediate needs.
- Plan to reserve religious community funds for those things which other groups are unable, according to their policies, to provide. Religious community money is the most flexible.
- Recruit and train volunteer case managers who will assist individuals and/or families in developing a recovery plan.
- Work case-by-case, completing one case before moving onto the next. Invite other agencies to regular round-table meetings to which you will bring cases to see what additional assistance you can get for them. Make sure you have secured a release of confidential information from each client before you share with those around the table.
- In a large disaster with many affected areas, county groups should be focused more on the needs of individuals rather than just the delivery of services. A piecemeal approach to unmet needs will almost insure that people will continue to fall through the cracks.
- Survivors will be tired of going from place to place to get what they need. A recovery group will bring everybody together in one place.
- Once you have exhausted local resources, a State Interfaith Organization may assist in connecting you with other funding sources. In very large disasters, State Interfaith Organizations may also work to bring all county recovery groups together regionally to discuss concerns, identify new strategies, and look for new resources.
- If you will be working for a long period of time, because of the workload, you may need to consider hiring a staff. Although the first option is to find volunteers to fulfill responsibilities, sometimes the time commitment is more than volunteers can realistically give.
- In some cases, the first person you should hire is someone to keep records, rather than a director or coordinator. This person will do all the detail work, enabling volunteer leaders to make good decisions and follow through.

Organization

As the LTRC begins to organize, it is import to begin with a clear statement of:

- The mission of the organization:
    - Each group should develop a statement with its reasons for coming together and what objectives will be accomplished.
    - The mission of the LTRC is to help the survivor to address serious, disaster related needs which cannot or have not been met by other disaster organizations.
    - It is the responsibility of the survivor to develop a working recovery plan in which he/she indicates what assistance will be absolutely necessary for them to get back on their feet and begin to put his/her life back in order.
- The criteria for assistance of individuals:
    - The key is to set priorities so that those who have the greatest need and the least resources will be assisted first.
    - Many groups decide to give priority to the elderly, handicapped and low income or single parent households.
    - The group could include geographic and demographic limits the committee would respond to, a discussion about how to handle self-employed, family business or family farm losses.
    - Assistance guidelines need to address the allocation of in-kind donations (i.e. lumber, building supplies, appliances, etc.) and volunteer labor.
- A sense of what the organizational structure will be:
    - Leadership of the group will be a function of its size and complexity. In small disasters all that may be necessary is a convener to call the group together and keep it on task.
    - When there are a large number of participating organizations, a coordinator could make sure that all preparation has been completed and that follow-up is done on a timely basis. A coordinator could work directly with the organizations around the table to anticipate challenges and facilitate communication, coordination and collaboration among the organizations.
    - Staffing should be functional - which means that once a task is identified someone will need to complete it. The first option would be to have volunteer staff when possible.
    - Hiring staff is a functional consideration as a second option.
- To designate one person to sit in the leadership role:
    - Regardless of the level of leadership necessary, this is important. That person should be chosen for the attributes of: impartiality, ability to lead, organizational skills, communication ability, problem solving, attitude and ability to keep a meeting on track.
- An agreed upon operational process:
    - The tasks of the LTRC should include educating itself in order to prepare for the work, developing a system of comprehensive case management, maintaining strict confidentiality in its workings with clients, identifying and avoiding conflicts of interest cases, and avoiding duplication of benefits to individuals.
    - Meetings should have an agenda, be kept on track, and, usually, last no more than 90 minutes. This will assure continued participation by agencies that were already busy before the onset of the disaster.
    - Someone will need to keep official minutes. This will facilitate follow-up on casework and assist in tracking the commitments made by agencies to the cases.
    - Treatment of cases generally is done in one of three ways or any combination of them:
        - In small groups, case management may take place around the table at the meetings.
        - As groups get larger and more community issues appear, case managers may meet separately from the LTRC and present an anonymous, composite report of each case to the committee. This can help to keep the air of casework more confidential.
        - A third approach could be for case managers to meet separately from the group. They could share basic information about each case to avoid duplication, and then each case manager could access resource providers directly to secure the needed resource for each case.
- Planning for discord and setting boundaries:

    - Most groups at some time reach a conflict around funding, resourcing, process, or political sensitivity. It is important for the group to have an agreed upon plan for intervention from the beginning.
    - If necessary, mediation or conflict resolution services may be available from social service agencies in the area or from a university extension service for little or no cost.
- A commitment to evaluate and adjust the group processing procedures, as the need presents itself:
    - Flexibility is a key word in the ongoing work of the disaster recovery organization. Rules may change. People will change their minds. Direction of the group may change without anyone noticing the changes. This is why it is important for the group to evaluate its mission, guidelines, structure and processing procedures at regular intervals.
- A closing or transition date:
    - Once the group has determined its case management procedure it will be possible for it to look at the potential number of cases of all the agencies, balance this against all the cases closed each week and arrive at a "sunset" date for the group. The date should remain flexible depending on the scope and size of the disaster.
    - As the sunset date approaches, members of the group will need to prepare for a clear process of closure.
    - An evaluation of the process and a debriefing for all workers involved are important parts of the closure process. This can be a time to celebrate accomplishments and a time to grieve over cases that may be left unfinished.
    - Transition discussions can become a way to avoid closure. There can be a reluctance to let the organization die. This is sometimes indicated by workers drumming up questionable cases relating to wants rather than needs.
    - It is important to honor the timelines of the commitment made by agency members to the LTRC and to close the LTRC when the work is complete.
    - One of the options for transition is to having a local agency take over responsibility for the cases and to agree to follow-up with any late applications for assistance. This should occur only after all cases, at the time of the transition, have been resourced and closed.
    - Some member may want to shift the focus of the group from recovery to preparedness for future disasters. If this becomes the direction the group wants to pursue, contact local Emergency Management to find ways to accomplish this transition.

Stages of a Long Term Recovery Committee

Group process happens in stages. This is a normal part of individuals coming together for a common purpose. The following are the stages that might be expected to occur as your LTRC moves forward.

Stage 1 A Collection of People and Agencies

- A group of individuals, agency representatives and local advocates come together because of a common concern for the survivors who have needs.
- They may or may not be familiar with each other.
- There are first attempts to organize and name a convener.
- Committee begins to sort out who has resources and what kinds of resources are available in the service area.
- The attitude of the group may be that they are ready to deal with each and every need that is presented to the group immediately – "Let's get it fixed!"
- Members will readily make referrals rather than do in-depth casework.
- First understandings of client confidentiality are established.

Stage 2 Making the Connections

- The group begins to make connections with the upper levels of their various agencies for resources, training, communications and support.
- The group begins to discern those members that can bring material, financial or personnel resources to the group from those who have other motives or agendas.
- The group begins to identify and incorporate funding sources outside of the current membership of the committee.

- The group defines and refines the funding channels.
- The group members begin to build trust and familiarity which allows for consultation outside of the formal committee meeting.
- Group members may still deal with cases on an individual agency basis.
- Groups may still be inclined to refer cases rather than do the casework themselves.
- Group members begin to know the channels for fact and information gathering, correcting misinformation and verifying information.
- The casework concept becomes more clearly understood with cases being presented at meetings by participating agencies.

Stage 3 Collaboration and Consultation

- Casework becomes more sophisticated so that referred cases rarely come back with requests for further documentation.
- An understanding and definition of disaster related needs emerges.
- Cooperative work on recovery plans is achieved.
- Cooperative responsibility for determining the unmet need of the survivor is achieved.
- There is monitoring and follow-up on agency commitments to cases.
- The ability to interpret and access existing resources from local, state, AND FEDERAL RESOURCES is utilized and well-understood.
- Non-disaster case needs are referred to programs having appropriate resources or services.
- Willingness to hear and brainstorm on interim case representations is achieved.
- A vision of existence beyond disaster recovery begins to emerge.

Stage 4 Moving into Completion and Maturity

- The committee has matured in relationships and responsibility sharing.
- The group is able to deny assistance when not within the ability of the committee to meet the needs or beyond the purview of the committee.
- The group has achieved the ability to close out cases.
- The group may or may not continue beyond disaster recovery and may or may not take on other community functions (i.e. preparedness or response to chronic community issues).